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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 ABUJA 000157

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AMEMBASSY YAOUNDE PASS TO AMEMBASSY MALABO

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [SOCI](#) [KPAO](#) [NI](#)  
SUBJECT: ASSISTANT SECRETARY CARSON DISCUSSES POLITICAL SITUATION  
WITH SECRETARY TO THE GOVERNMENT OF THE FEDERATION AND FORMER  
NATIONAL SECURITY ADVISOR

CLASSIFIED BY: James P. McAnulty, Political Counselor, U.S. Embassy  
Abuja, Political Section; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

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SUMMARY

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¶1. (C) Nigerian Secretary to the Government of the Federation (SGF) Mahmud Yayale Ahmed discussed the current "very abnormal" political situation, President Yar'Adua's health, concerns about the 2011 elections, and what he considers an Algerian-Chadian axis of support for extremists February 9 in a meeting with Assistant Secretary for African Affairs Johnnie Carson. Ahmed acknowledged that, given Yar'Adua's health condition and the rapid way he departed, "he was hardly in any position to transmit power" when he left Nigeria. He also criticized the handling of the situation by the President's close associates, as well as the "excesses" of the Governors. He suggested that, since no one has heard from the President, there was no way to say whether he was fit or in a coma. In a separate meeting later February 9 with former National Security Adviser (NSA) and retired General Aliyu Mohammed Gusau, the Assistant Secretary heard about the North's conditional support for Vice President Goodluck Jonathan to serve out Yar'Adua's term, but predicted that Jonathan would be criticized either as overly ambitious or aloof and lacking ambition. Gusau also expressed support for enacting electoral reforms before the 2011 elections and noted widespread lack of faith in Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) Chairperson Maurice Iwu. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) In a February 9 meeting, SGF Ahmed spoke frankly about the current political situation and President Yar'adua's health with Assistant Secretary Carson. Ambassador, Special Assistant Cook, and PolOff (notetaker) also attended. Ahmed seemingly confirmed reports that Yar'Adua was unconscious when he left Nigeria for Saudi Arabia, declaring that "the President was hardly in any position to transmit power" when he departed. Ahmed further acknowledged the "very abnormal situation" in which the country found itself, pointedly observing that "the President can suddenly fall into a coma, but not be dead" and noted the constitutional dilemma of such a situation.

¶3. (C) Ahmed opined that the military recognized that its intervention was "no longer acceptable or practical" for Nigeria. As a former Defense Minister, however, he noted that it was always necessary to keep an eye on junior military officers. Ahmed admitted to holding private meetings with "junior military officers" on highlighting the importance of the democratic process. He also said he had met with other "senior public servants," whom he further described as former Permanent Secretaries who served from 1966 to 1970 to develop a strategy on a way forward in accordance with democratic processes and the rule of law. He emphasized his personal concern that the situation not be "dichotomized" (i.e., North versus South, or Muslim versus Christian).

¶4. (C) Additionally, Ahmed seemed somewhat critical of the way events had been handled and that they had "still not reached the kind of sincerity" he would prefer. He remarked that, "subsequent events have shown that we didn't handle this situation well." Ahmed criticized the unchecked power of Governors "to spend, embezzle, and do anything they like with the electoral process," as well as the Governors' recent efforts to use the National Assembly, particularly the Senate, to explore impeachment of the President. Ahmed pointed out that this would be unsuccessful, since the President must be given an opportunity to defend himself, which, Ahmed said, "he clearly cannot do." Per Section 144 of the Constitution, he added, the Federal Executive Committee (FEC) may, with a two-thirds majority, declare the President "incapable" of

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doing his job. According to Ahmed, any such efforts would be based on circumstantial evidence and involve the "telling of lies," because "no member of the FEC has either seen or heard from the president or seen his medical reports." He noted that the FEC would be reluctant to do so, as most members had been appointed or supported by Yar'Adua, and would view such an action as appearing disloyal. (COMMENT: Ahmed's remarks confirmed information from the media and contacts regarding his testimony before the Senate, in which he reportedly admitted that he had not seen or spoken with President Yar'Adua since the November 23 departure for Saudi Arabia. END COMMENT.)

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HURDLES TO OVERCOME FOR CREDIBLE 2011 ELECTIONS  
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¶5. (C) Ahmed questioned whether Nigeria was "really ready for credible national elections in 2011," given shortcomings highlighted by the Anambra gubernatorial poll which would presumably be exponentially worse in a nationwide election. Ahmed delineated four main challenges to the holding of free and fair elections in 2011, based partly on the outcome of the Anambra polls. He cited the need for compilation of a credible voter register, clear delineation of constituencies, a transparent umpire "not dented" by prior accusations of interference, and gubernatorial leaders who agreed to play by the rules. Ahmed expressed doubt that Nigeria could overcome such obstacles in time for 2011 absent "strong, courageous transitional leadership" uninterested in running for reelection. Ahmed claimed to have been responsible for conducting elections in 1979 and 1983, and to have visited the U.S. to study American electoral processes at the time.

¶6. (C) Ambassador Carson expressed USG willingness to provide electoral technical and financial assistance, as long as political will for improvement existed among leaders and INEC demonstrated a willingness to accept such help and use monetary assistance wisely. The Assistant Secretary emphasized that INEC must be willing to

implement recommendations of the U.S. and U.K.-funded election assessment mission conducted last month and headed by Ghanaian Dr. Afari-Gyan. Carson pointed out that President Yar'Adua had informed Secretary Clinton that free, fair, and credible elections were his highest priority, and remarked what a wonderful legacy that would be.

17. (C) The SGF commented that Vice President Jonathan appeared "duly committed" to accurate counting of votes, and emphasized the need to nominate credible candidates as INEC commissioners. Ahmed noted the role Nigerian pride has played in the debate over electoral reform, citing commentators' observations that "even Ghana has completed good elections."

18. (C) Ahmed resolved that it was time to "start clipping the wings of the governors" and mentioned that he had told INEC Chairperson that he must stop accepting nominations for Commissioners from Governors. He described the incumbent as "a necessary evil" who requires transformation, but whom he thought would bend to the political winds of change. Ahmed encouraged the U.S. and U.K. to show more concern over the excesses of the Governors.

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U.S. EXPECTATIONS OF NIGERIA  
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19. (C) The Assistant Secretary identified U.S. hopes that the GON would 1) clearly and officially acknowledge that extremists and potential terrorists exist everywhere, including in Nigeria, 2) allow U.S. air marshals on flights to the United States, 3) improve port security, and 4) approve the counter-terrorism bill in the National Assembly. Such steps would not only assist the international community collectively, but potentially show that Nigeria merited removal from the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) watch list. Carson noted that Nigerians died during the September 11, 2001, attacks in the U.S. and nationals from more over a dozen countries would have died had the December 25 attack succeeded.

110. (C) In response, the SGF said he expected approval soon of counter-terrorism legislation and expressed concern about the influence of Algeria over groups like Boko Haram, whom he judged to be "much more dangerous than the Shiites." Ahmed alleged that external forces were helping Nigerian extremists and expressed an interest in greater information sharing about what he described as an Algerian-Chadian axis of support for extremists. Ahmed related that he had conferred with Arab and Israeli intelligence officials whom he knew from his time as Minister of Defense. He expressed hope that the GON would use the Abdulmutallab incident to "expose our inadequacies" and pledged to fight terror both locally and internationally.

111. (C) Lastly, the Ambassador informed the SGF that insistence by the Aviation Minister on prohibiting flights by United and Continental Airlines into Nigeria after stopping in Accra, Ghana, violated provisions of the Open Skies agreement.

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¶12. (C) Assistant Secretary Carson and the Ambassador met separately February 9 with former NSA Gusau, who asserted that a stable, constitutional, and democratic transition remained important to the North. Gusau added that "a mature solution to Yar'Adua's absence is fundamental to Nigeria's survival." When asked to describe Northern reactions, Gusau downplayed any contention over power succession, asserting that "no matter who you talk to in the North, all agree that Goodluck Jonathan will serve out Yar'Adua's term until 2011, then step down, and allow the North to rule for one more term." Gusau also told the Assistant Secretary that this scenario may change, if for example Jonathan rallies support for a second term, puts his own people in government, and removes those not loyal to him. Gusau suggested that whichever route he chose, he will most likely be labeled either as "aloof" should he maintain the status quo, or as "ambitious" if he tries to exert power. When asked how a new Vice President will be chosen if Jonathan becomes President, Gusau intimated that Yar'Adua's Chief of Staff or someone else close to Yar'Adua would likely receive the nod.

¶13. (C) Commenting on the 2011 elections, Gusau said that "everyone has lost faith" in INEC Chairperson Maurice Iwu. He also commented

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that many people look forward to approval of the electoral reform bill, concluding, that the success of the 2011 election will depend upon it.

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COMMENT  
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14 (C) SGF Ahmed spoke refreshingly frankly about the condition of the President and the uncharted political waters in which Nigeria found itself as a result of his failing health and absence. Remarkably, the few members of Yar'Adua's family and inner circle who reportedly know the reality successfully kept such information from senior Nigerian officials. Thus far, most in the Nigerian military have recognized their proper role, avoiding the temptation to initiate a coup. However, it is good that the SGF has used his past role as Minister of Defense to engage military rank and file on the importance of the democratic process and the proper role of the military in a democracy. He retains respect at the Ministry of Defense.

¶15. (C) The SGF, while previously a close adviser to Yar'Adua, is definitely "on the outs" with the Yar'Adua inner circle, which no longer trusts him. The SGF seemed to admit as much during the meeting. Meanwhile, the SGF remains a good interlocutor for the U.S. Mission and one of the most practical persons with whom to engage. He proved extremely helpful in overcoming road blocks erected by INEC on meeting with the Election Assessment Team. He supports election reform, and Mission will likely need his good offices to encourage a faster pace for enacting reforms, as the country remains only nine to twelve months away from the next national election. As for General Gusau, he supports election reform but continues to entertain political ambitions for 2011. His views, therefore, should be viewed in the context of such ambitions. END COMMENT.

¶16. (U) Assistant Secretary Carson departed from Abuja before having the opportunity to clear on this telegram.  
SANDERS